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ABSTRACT

An exploratory study investigated the relationship between perceptions and practices in reading and language arts, and examined whether teachers were using practices to develop students' literacy skills suggested in work by Marie Clay. Subjects, 16 out of a possible 22 kindergarten teachers in one southern school district, responded to a 138-item questionnaire involving reading, writing, concepts about print, and letter/sound associations. Results indicated that: (1) teachers' practices involving "reading materials" and "who read to whom" generally matched Clay's recommendations; (2) practices and perceptions of teachers matched fairly closely for reading materials, who read to whom, and writing; and (3) practices in concepts about print and letter/sound associations did not match recommendations by Clay, nor did practices and beliefs generally match one another. Results also indicated that: two of the seven schools had acceptable practices in reading and letter/sound association; one school was acceptable in reading; two had unacceptable responses in all areas; and two schools were disregarded because only one teacher from each responded. Findings suggest that many kindergarten teachers' practices in reading and writing match Clay's recommendations. Further research is called for. (Contains 16 references.) (RS)

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Kindergarten Teachers' Perceptions and Practices in Reading/Language Arts

Kindergarten Reading/Language Arts Beliefs & Practice

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Possible Abstract

Kindergarten Teachers' Perceptions and Practices in Reading/Language Arts

Data was collected from kindergarten teachers in one southern school district in an exploratory study designed to investigate the relationship between perceptions and practices in reading and language arts. Research questions were: 1) Are kindergarten teachers using practices which would develop students' literacy skills and concepts about print as suggested in work by Marie Clay? 2) Do practices and beliefs of kindergarten teachers match? and 3) Do some schools or some teachers align their practices more closely with those suggested by Clay? Sixteen of 22 possible teachers responded through a two-part questionnaire, which included 138 items involving Reading, Writing, Concepts about Print, and Letter/Sound Associations. After examining both descriptive and correlational results, the researcher concluded that teachers' practices involving "reading materials" and "who read to whom" generally matched Clay's recommendations. Practices and perceptions of teachers matched fairly closely in this area. Similar results were found in writing. Largest discrepancies occurred with concepts about print and letter/ sound associations. Practices in both areas generally did not match recommendations by Clay, nor did practices and beliefs generally match one another. In examining responses by school, two of seven schools had acceptable practices in reading and letter/sound association. One school was acceptable in reading. Two had unacceptable responses in all areas, and two schools were disregarded because only one teacher from each responded.

Kindergarten Teachers' Perceptions and Practices in Reading/Language Arts

Purpose

This exploratory study was designed to investigate the relationship between perceptions and practices in reading and language arts of kindergarten teachers. Research questions were: (1) Are kindergarten teachers using practices which would develop students' literacy skills and concepts about print as suggested in work by Marie Clay? (2) Do practices and beliefs of kindergarten teachers match? (3) Do some schools or some teachers align their practices more closely with those suggested by Clay?

Background Literature

Donaldson (1978) was concerned about quickly closing the universally-recognized gap between those who are best prepared for school learning and those who are least prepared. Allen et al. (1989) found this gap need not limit children's ability to grow as writers. Clay (1991) stated that lack of literacy experiences before school did not imply deficits in the child or his preschool culture but added that schools must allow children to catch up.

Ferreiro and Teberosky (1982) studied children 4 to 6 years of age and found that they reconstructed writing for themselves. Vygotsky (1978) recommended teaching writing naturally in preschool years, making reading and writing necessary in play. To do this, Clay (1991) suggested reading and writing messages.

Reading and writing were found to be mutually supportive in young children as they move toward conventional writing and reading when provided with demonstrations of writing, writing materials, and encouragement in using their own systems (Sulzby and Teale, 1985). Goodman (1985) averred that school environments should be full of complex written forms so beginning writers could evolve "functional purposes for writing, the organization or form of the writing system, and the way these relate to meaning" (p. 17).

Mason, Peterman, Powell, and Kerr (1989) found that kinds of books read aloud could affect students' recall, attempts to read, and content of student writing. Donaldson (1978) stressed stories be chosen for qualities of language as well as story quality.

Johns (1980) suggested teachers help students learn differences between letters and words and attend to punctuation in text. Wells (1986) found a strong relationship between awareness of concepts about print and ability to identify letters at age 5 and all later assessments of school achievement. Ehri and Sweet (1991) noted importance of children knowing their letters and having some skill in phonemic segmentation.

The following studies represent the paucity in research comparing kindergarten teachers' beliefs and practices. Hatch and Freeman (1988) found greater variance between perceptions and practice. The majority of educators held beliefs contrary to what they practiced. Charlesworth et al (1990) found positive

correlations between beliefs and practices, whether developmentally appropriate or inappropriate; and developmentally inappropriate practices predominated, based on tenets of NAEYC. Smith and Shepard (1988), who compared beliefs and practice of kindergarten readiness and retention, hypothesized that when staff members at individual schools have autonomy in decision making, positive correlations between beliefs and practice may be stronger.

Background of the Study

The study reported here evolved after mid-year Reading Recovery testing of average first-grade students (labeled such by their classroom teachers) from ten classrooms yielded low results. More extensive testing followed involving teacher-identified low, average, and high first-graders. Results indicated over half of the first-grade population was achieving well under Reading Recovery standards for average at mid-year.

The belief was stated that development of literacy skills in first grade could be accelerated through developmentally appropriate literacy activities in kindergarten. A study to determine beliefs and practices of kindergarten teachers regarding reading/language arts seemed appropriate before determining how to address future needs.

Method

Subjects

Sixteen out of a possible 22 kindergarten teachers responded to a questionnaire representing seven elementary schools. Two elementary school principals declined participation in the study.

The respondents' experience teaching at the kindergarten level ranged from one to more than 17 years, with years in district covering the same range. College degrees were earned within the span from 1965 to 1992, with the highest degree that of specialist. Fifteen teachers had participated in whole language workshops within the previous five years, and five respondents had taken at least one graduate course in reading and/or language arts in that time. Two had experience on curriculum committees within the previous two years.

Instrument

After a review of literature on emergent literacy the following premises were developed: 1) children should have books with a strong story, rich language, and possible repetition, rhyme, and predictability read to them at least once a day; 2) students should have access to a wide range of reading materials daily; 3) students should have writing materials at all centers and daily opportunities to write; 4) concepts about print should be pointed out to students, and they should have meaningful opportunities to demonstrate suck knowledge; 5) students should be taught letter/sound correspondence, letter identification, and letter formation in context of purposeful

reading and writing activities; 6) student names are an excellent tool for learning functions of print, letter identification, and letter/sound correspondence.

A two-part questionnaire was developed. Part I consisted of 61 items regarding instructional practice and activities. Part II was designed to determine perceptions of kindergarten teachers regarding which practices they felt should be included in a kindergarten reading/language arts program. Seventy-seven items were included.

Items on Part I and Part II formed four general themes. Included were Reading, Writing, Concepts about Print, and Letter/Sound Association. Respondents were also asked to provide demographic information.

Construct validity of the instrument was established by a panel of three university reading professors from two universities. One is directly involved in Reading Recovery. One has extensive knowledge of Reading Recovery but is not directly involved in the program. A third has limited knowledge of Reading Recovery.

Analysis of Data

Correlational analyses were conducted to determine relationships between teachers' practices and their beliefs regarding kindergarten reading/language arts. Items on beliefs and practices were matched and categorized under the labels Reading, Writing, Concepts about Print, and Letter/Sound Association. Since it was assumed that responses were measured

on an ordinal scale, the Spearman rho statistic was used to measure association between beliefs and practices. Contingency tables were used to investigate patterns of responses between practices and beliefs in each of the four categories.

Results

Results will be discussed in the order of the research questions.

Are Teachers Using Practices as Suggested by Clay?

In determining whether current practices of kindergarten teachers match recommendations of Clay, results will be discussed by categories--Reading, Writing, Concepts about Print, and Letter/Sound Association. Practice is labeled appropriate if it is based on Clay's recommendations.

Reading

In Reading, 10 items from Part I were examined. These items focused on reading materials and who uses them. On four items 100% of the teachers responded that they conducted appropriate practice at least once a week. On the lowest match, 69% stated that students had access to big books and chart texts during independent reading time about once a week. Magazines are available to children in 75% of the rooms. Three-fourths of the teachers report comparing and contrasting children's names about once a week or more. In 94% of the rooms books and other reading materials may be found in many locations.

In summary, teachers' practices in reading as described above closely match recommendations by Clay.

Writing

Fourteen items from Part I dealt with activities involving writing and who does the writing. Only four items had 100% of the teachers state they did it about once a week or more. One of these items was having each individual write their own name on their papers. Although all classrooms have a writing center, in only 73% of the classrooms are writing supplies at each center.

Students write their own text in 69% of the classes about once a week or more. Half of the teachers responded that the teacher and students share writing at least once a week during language experience writing activities, with individual children writing what they know and the teacher writing what they do not know. Responses marked indicate that language experience writing activities occur more frequently in whole class settings than in small groups.

In summary, all classrooms have writing centers, and students write their own names. In the majority of classrooms, sometimes the teacher does the writing, and sometimes students do their own writing.

Concepts about Print

This area of Part I was covered most extensively, because there are many different concepts about print. Some of these are directionality in reading and writing, concept of word versus letter, knowing where to begin reading, and understanding common punctuation marks. No item from Part I had a response of once a week or more often from 100% of the teachers.

Once a week or more often 36% of the teachers ask a child to show where to start reading. One-fourth of the teachers reported asking a child to show the first and last parts of a page of text at least once a week. Similarly, children in 43% of the classrooms have a chance to show the teacher where to go when a line of multi-lined text has been read, while 69% of the teachers demonstrate that concept.

To summarize, this area had the greatest variance in answers. Specific concepts which seem to be made explicit with less frequency include concepts dealing with punctuation, capital letters, and parts of pages and words.

Letter/Sound Association

Six items fell into this category, which covered such topics as using a formal phonics program and focusing on one letter per week. While 38% of the teachers responded that they do one letter per week in alphabetical order, 50% report doing one letter per week in an order related to what is being studied. Published phonics programs are used by 19% of the teachers once a week or more often.

In 81% of the reported classrooms teachers ask students what letter they would expect to see first in a word several times a week. Students are asked to articulate words slowly and tell what they hear once a week or more in 81% of the classrooms. All talk about sounds matching letters as needed in writing and reading activities.

While all teachers have students attempt to match letters to sounds in writing and reading activities, about one-fifth still use a published phonics program. A majority of teachers continue to focus on one letter per week, whether in alphabetical or some other order.

Do Practices and Beliefs of Kindergarten Teachers Match?

This issue will be handled by looking at responses in each of the four categories.

Reading

Fourteen matchings from items from Part I and Part II were examined. In all 14, most teachers claim to have beliefs which agree or strongly agree with practices they are using. In eight of those, 100% of the teachers agree with the belief stated in Part II. In half of those, 100% of the teachers state they conduct practices which match the belief several times a week.

For closer examination, three paired items will be examined. Although 100% of the teachers do not believe that they alone should read big books and/or charts of text with enlarged print to the children, in only 69% of the classrooms do children have access to such material more than rarely.

In 94% of the cases, teachers agree that centers should include a book nook area, even though 100% of the teachers state that their rooms have a book center with trade books for children to read. At a rate of 94% teachers agree that it is important for students to be able to recognize names others than their own.

However, in only 75% of the classrooms is time spent once a week or more to compare and contrast children's names.

Overall, with regard to material to be read and who should have access to it, teachers' beliefs and practices matched positively.

Writing

Twenty-three paired items were analyzed in this category. Of those, nine had a smaller percentage of teachers who agreed with a belief compared to those who practiced it several times a week.

One such match regarded who did the writing during group experiences. Teachers stated they actually do more of the writing than they believe they should be doing. While only 63% of the teachers believe that kindergartners will learn the letters they need when they are writing their own stories, 88% claim to talk about how to make letters as needed in writing and reading activities at least once a week.

Two-thirds of the teachers have children write their own text several times a week. However, only half the teachers believe students should do their own writing when recording student ideas on individual papers or group work.

Also, more teachers seem to use worksheets for handwriting practice than believe in having formal handwriting instruction. Additionally, only 44% of the teachers believe that students should learn how to form all the letters before going to first

grade, and 25% believe teaching how to form letters is better left to first grade.

For writing beliefs and practices, practices occur more frequently than beliefs would suggest. Teachers and students share writing responsibilities at various times.

Concepts about Print

As stated before, this area contained the most items, with 31 paired items from Part I and Part II. Once again, this category showed the greatest variance across items. In 26 of the pairings teachers indicated a stronger belief than their practice would convey, assuming that if they believe in something they will do it at least once a week.

An example of a large difference would be that, even though teachers believe that kindergarten children need to know that you begin to read on the left page before the right page when both pages contain print, teachers seldom point this out or provide opportunities for students to demonstrate knowledge of the concept. The concept of first and last of a page carried a similar difference between belief and practice, as did the concept of knowing where to start reading.

Kindergarten teachers do more closely match their belief when they point word by word as they read. Although teachers believe matching word by word is important, only 50% of the teachers responded that they give children the opportunity to demonstrate this concept once a week or more often.

Teachers also claim to believe in the need for them to point out the front of a book before reading it to the children. Over one-third of the teachers indicated belief that kindergarten children do not know the front of a book upon entering kindergarten, but providing opportunity for students to demonstrate that knowledge occurs rarely in half of the rooms.

Nearly 94% of the teachers responded they agree that kindergarten children need to recognize the difference between numbers, letters, and words. However, teachers in only 56% of the classrooms allow individuals a chance to "show me" a word or letter in text once a week or more. All the teachers indicated agreement that they occasionally should point out the first and last letters of a word. The practice of doing so occurs in 44% of the classrooms once a week or more.

In general, teacher beliefs about concepts about print appear more closely related to Clay's suggestions than their practices would indicate. This was demonstrated in 26 of 31 paired items.

Letter/Sound Association

Items from Parts I and II formed 12 matched pairs in this category. One pair had 100% positive response in both practice and belief. All the teachers believe there is a place in kindergarten for work with sounds and letters, and all talk about sounds matching letters as needed in writing and reading activities at least once a week.

Six pairs had stronger responses in practice than beliefs.

Fewer than half the teachers believe that children in kindergarten will learn their letters best when focusing attention on one letter per week, yet it occurs in 63% of the classrooms. Some teachers do one letter per week in alphabetical order, while others do one letter per week in an order that fits what is being studied.

Only 13% of the teachers believe phonics should be taught as children need a specific letter to go with a sound. Over 40% believe they should devote some time each day to a formal phonics program. One-fourth of the teachers believe there should not be a formal phonics instructional program in kindergarten. In 19% of the classrooms such programs are used once a week or more.

Teachers seem to be using some practices they do not totally believe in when working with letter/sound associations.

Statistical Tests

The Spearman rho statistic for ordinal data was used to statistically test the association between beliefs' ratings (higher matches Clay) and practices (more frequent matches Clay). In examining correlational results, few significant correlations were found between practices and beliefs. None were found in Reading. In writing, for the paired items of students using worksheets to practice making their letters and teachers believing that kindergartners should learn how to form all the letters before going to first grade, rho = .52 ($p < .05$).

In the area of Concepts about Print, significance ($p < .05$) was found for the following paired items. The teacher points to

each word 1:1 while reading and the belief that the adult should do so (rho = .6). Teacher shows where to start reading by pointing to the beginning of the print/text and the belief that the teacher should mention frequently about where to start and which way to go when reading to a group of kindergartners (rho = .57). The teacher points out where to go when finished with one line of text on a multi-lined page of text and the belief that, after considerable modeling by the teacher, the teacher should ask individual children to show where to start reading and which way to go (rho = .58). The teacher shows the first part of a page of text and the last part of the page when reading and the belief that the concept of first and last on a page is important at the kindergarten level (rho = .54).

For Letter/Sound Association, the only pair that was statistically related (rho = .62, $p < .05$) was the practice of doing one letter per week in alphabetical order and the belief that children in kindergarten will learn their letters best by doing a letter each week.

When using the Spearman rho statistic to analyze data, few significant relationships were found. This would indicate that teachers' practices and beliefs often do not correspond closely with one another.

<u>Do some schools or some teachers align their practices more closely with those suggested by Clay?</u>

For the purposes of this report, it was decided to examine responses for patterns by school. These will be reported using

the previously mentioned categories. Practice is aligned with those suggested by Clay if at least half of the items received responses that teachers used them more than once a week. Schools were assigned identification numbers--1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8. Schools 5 and 9 did not participate.

Schools 3 and 7 have no categories in which at least half of their practices correspond with Clay. School 1 corresponds in Reading, and Schools 4 and 6 correspond in Reading and Letter/Sound Association. No school corresponds in Writing or Concepts about Print. The category with the best representation is Reading, with three schools having acceptable responses at least half of the time.

(Note: Schools 2 and 8 were not considered in this description since only one teacher per school responded.)

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that many kindergarten teachers' practices in Reading and Writing match Clay's recommendations. Their practices in Letter/Sound Association are less acceptable, and their practices in Concepts about Print leave a lot to be desired.

Examination of correlations between practices and beliefs indicate that few significant relationships exist. In many instances beliefs appeared to be stronger than practices would indicate. This was especially true in Concepts about Print. However, the reverse seemed to be true with Letter/Sound

Association in which teachers seemed to be practicing activities in which they did not believe strongly or even slightly.

Implications for further study include examining how to help pre-service and in-service teachers of young children know how to address issues of concepts about print in developmentally appropriate ways. Further research needs to determine reasons why teachers practice activities in which they do not believe or do not practice activities in which they do believe and what can be done to change the situation. A replication of this study with a larger sample would be of interest in determining whether these tendencies are more wide-spread.

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